DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 130 319 CS 203 032

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TITLE Towards More Painless Grammar.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (27th, Philadelphia, March 25-27, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; College Freshmen; *Composition Skills (Literary); *Grammar; Higher Education; Individualized Instruction; Teaching Techniques; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Teaching grammar to freshman composition students can be accomplished without turning the class into a remedial course or expending an undue amount of either student or teacher energy. Before grammar can have meaning for students, however, writing itself must become important to them. The teaching of the mechanics of language, therefore, should take place within the context of students' compositions. Six "minigrammars," or self-instructional units, are designed to help students achieve a working knowledge of the following: subject and verb identification; proper verb forms and tense shifting; sentence fragments and run-on sentences; pronouns; sentence logic, including misplaced modifiers; and elementary matters of style, principally sentence combining. (KS)

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Towards More Painless Grammar

The evidence is piling up everyday; we don't need the media to tell us that increasingly "Johnny can't write." Most of us, I am sure, can sympathize with Phyllis Zagano, who in the March 1, 1976 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education announced she "can't teech comp no more," because it is no longer the unusual student who comes into her class poorly grounded in grammar, mechanics, and spelling; it is the unusual student who does not arrive poorly equipped. And we laugh--but wryly--at the companion piece, "Diary of a Mad Freshman English Teacher" in which Loretta M. Shpunt wistfully desires to acquire a rubber stamp printed with WRONG in capital letters, for liberal use on papers.

I believe we have entered a time of genuine crisis in the teaching of college composition. Whether we like it or not, large numbers of students are coming to our classes so weak in grammar that it is even hard to talk about such a simple thing as mechanics, much less what most of us consider

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the real meat of a freshman composition course--to help a student find, and express efficiently and effectively, thoughts worth writing about. Sometimes I think I would like, along with some of my vocal colleagues, to refuse to teach what should have been taught during the previous twelve years; I would like to "send a message back to the high schools," as one colleague put it, that students so sadly deficient are going to be failed or not admitted to college. But there are two practical obstacles to such a course. One: in my school at least, there wouldn't be a freshman class left if entrance standards were raised very much, and I frankly can't see my administration going along with such a drastic proposal. Two: it isn't fair to the generation of students now in our colleges. No doubt we have the usual supply of deadbeats who try to get by with the least possible work; most of my students, however, are intelligent and hard-working, wanting to do well. When these latter show themselves to be almost hopelessly mired in ignorance, I can't honestly blame <u>them</u>, and I don't think we should just write off a whole generation.

Furthermore, I think the situation we find ourselves in is going to continue for some time. Even should the lower schools move immediately to meet the problem, it will take several years--at least five, I would judge--before we see significant improvement. But while there is some evidence the lower schools <u>are</u> assessing the problem and trying to work with it, I doubt if new ways of thinking and consequently new ways of acting are yet widespread. So perhaps it will be more like ten years before we again see a student body as well prepared as those to which we were once accustomed.

I don't want to fix blame; I think what we are seeing now just "grew like Topsy." Marshall McLuhan alerted us some years back, but even if we listened, it was too soon to see more than the major outlines of the future.

The future is with us now; we are experiencing the real "electronic age" Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, ex-English professor Ron Pirsig's autobiographical novel, provides a good metaphor for the situation we face. Students in our classes are, by and large, children of Zen, like John in the book, who merely rode his powerful motorcycle through the countryside, reacting instinctively to the totality of the experience. Our students do not necessarily know Zen, but they are products of a western version of Zen's romantic philosophy of the whole. Influenced primarily by television and music, both of which come to them fully created, requiring no analysis and little thought, most young people today simply perceive the whole without rational analysis, then accept or reject it, without rational thought.

We, however, are trying in our classes to teach motorcycle maintenance. Our motorcycle--good writing--operates on principles which--no matter what language we use--boil down to what rhetoricians have always talked about: focus, unity, concreteness, coherence, emphasis, clarity. Underlying these basic principles are the nuts and bolts: grammatical underpinnings such as parts of speech, subject-verb agreement, pronoun agreement, sentence fragments, run-on or fused sentences--and whatever else you wish to add.

Grammar, as far as my students are concerned, is what motorcycle maintenance was to John--a complicated tangle they don't understand and would rather not contemplate. But just as John would have been lost if his machine had broken down in the middle of Montana far from a mechanic, so my students are at a loss if something goes wrong with their writing. They don't know the terminology; they don't know how the parts fit together: they can't fix what has gone wrong. John says to the "author" of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, who has just been trying to show him some relatively simple maintenance job, "I wouldn't know where to begin." Neither do my

students who are trying to get a grasp on grammar; they don't know where to begin.

I am much concerned that, confronted with our students' woeful deficiencies, we will take one of two extremes. We will refuse to deal with grammar; no one likes to teach it and no one likes to study it, so let's sweep it under the carpet; if our students later can't pass their LSAT's our pre-med entrance exams, don't look at us. There is plenty of that sentiment in my department, where one of my outspoken colleagues, for instance, is plumping loudly for a remedial course, announcing that she won't teach grammar; "it's just a pain in the ass!" Some places <u>are</u> going back to remedial courses, and we are looking at some alternatives of that sort at Central Michigan University.

But lacking a course expressly designed for teaching grammar, mechanics and spelling, I fear also that many will turn the freshman composition course into what it has too often been in the past, primarily a grammar course with little application to writing. There is sentiment for that, too, at my college: one instructor has freshman composition students "write a rhetoric," meaning "copy rules out of the handbooks." I am now blessed with two products of that method in my advanced composition; neither student has a clear concept of thesis and development--and neither is noticeably stronger in grammar and mechanics than are other students in the class. We simply must not forget the lessons of the recent past--that exercises and rules divorced from practical application in the writing proces, more often than not fail to produce good writing. Writing is a totality--a Zen product--just as much as it is a sum of its parts. To care about the motorcycle at all, one must have a total picture of it both as a material object and a vehicle for experiencing joy, expanding one's consciousness, arriving at new knowledge. It is the same with our rhetorical motorcycle. We must

preserve the vision of the whole while working with the parts. We can't do this by encumbering our class periods with endless grammar drills.

What I have been trying to do is develop a method of working with grammar without turning the class into a remedial course and without expending an undue amount of either teacher or student time and energy. Before developing such a method, however, there are several basic premises which must be accepted.

First, we must recognize that we can't teach all of grammar in a quarter or a semester without turning our class into a remedial course. What are the absolutely essential things about grammar that a student should be able to handle? I think that if we isolate two problems--sentence fragments and run-on sentences--we have almost met the criteria. If we add pronoun agreement and misplaced modifiers, relatively easy matters to handle, I think we have done all we can be expected to do, as far as grammar goes. Mechanics and style are different matters which depend on grammar; neither can be taught except by rote unless the student understands how a sentence works grammatically. But once the grammar of a sentence is clear, mechanics fade as a problem, and stylistics can be dealt with productively.

Second, we must not underestimate the depth of our students' ignorance. Many students in my classes--perhaps initially most of them--cannot identify subjects and predicates. When they can't pick out subjects and predicates, recognizing complete sentences is a guess at best. If they aren't certain about complete sentences, they can't, with any confidence, recognize sentence fragments and run-on sentences. I know my students are weak on subjects and predicates. Last fall I conducted some surveys for use in this talk; of twenty-three students in a fairly average class, four failed

a simple quiz on subjects and predicates after they had worked on a series of exercises, and another four made grades of D. Only two made A. Too many teachers, I think, are not aware of the large number of students who don't understand what you mean if you write "run-on sentence" in the margin. Students think the sentence is too long and conclude you like short sentences. So that's what they give you, and you are appalled at the primitive level at which they express their thoughts--usually without correcting the run-on sentences. You wearily call the problem to their attention again, wondering why they don't pay attention to your comments. The student, having done the best he knows how, gives up and says, "I've always hated English anyway." This tale is a little exaggerated, perhaps, but not much.

Third: it is important not to take a Zen approach to motorcycle maintenance. Everyone's tendency, I think, is to take one look at a much marred paper, mutter "my God!" and either totally give up or totally demolish the student's work, marking every error with Messianic fervor. Students, receiving the papers back, also take a Zen view, deducing a totalistic message--"You're a failure!"--and, like John, don't know where to begin. Not only must we find and start at the lowest level of our students' prior knowledge, but we must proceed from there one step at a time. Trying to correct every problem on every paper is to court disaster and frustration for both teacher and student.

Nor do I think it is useful to start with grammar and work upwards toward the essay. Most students come to college convinced they can't write or that they hate to write--often both. Premature concentration on the parts rather than the whole confirms their assumption. Before grammar can have meaning to them--and without meaning there is no learning--they must have at least some understanding of writing as a product of their own mind

and imagination. This is the lesson that members of the Macrorie school have taught us and we will do well not to forget it. There is something to be said for the view that as writing becomes meaningful to the student, it almost automatically becomes more competent and effective. This is the Zen school of teaching and it has had some remarkable successes. I am a traditionalist who, having tried the Macrorie method, will never go back to the old system of leading gradually through the parts to the whole. That method now seems to me all backwards. Students must first begin to see writing's possibilities for liberating them from the silence and confusion within themselves. That is what the Macrorie method does, at its best.

The problem is that colleges are not systematized to allow students to arrive first at a comprehension of writing as a beautiful and exciting vehicle, worth the effort of repair, maintenance, and polishing. With some students, it might be reached quite fast, within a few weeks; others might take a year or more. Most colleges don't give us that kind of flexibility. Where freshman composition is concerned, colleges don't give; they demand.

When to say, "Well, that's as much time as I can give to Zen; now let's get on with the motorcycle maintenance," is problematical and must be an individual decision. In a semester, I resolutely ignore massive faults of grammar and mechanics, along with atrocious spelling, for about three weeks. Then I begin gradually to move in. In matters of mechanics and spelling, with which I am <u>not</u> primarily concerned here, I begin first to mark the more obvious errors. Soon after, I have students write some personal experience <u>with dialogue</u>, and at that time I give them principles of punctuating dialogue, along with other simple punctuation rules. I make the students correct errors before they are given credit, on the theory that if they can paragraph and punctuate dialogue, other punctuation problems will be easy

to understand and correct. As for spelling, if it persists in being poor I begin to demand corrections and special work from the individuals involved. None of this, except some introduction to dialogue punctuation, need take class time.

Grammar, of course, is more complex. For my purposes, I have developed a set of six minigrammars, which are self-instructional. The grammatical elements taken up are (1) identification of subjects and verbs; (2) proper verb forms and tense shifting; (3) sentence fragments and run-on sentences; (4) pronoun problems; (5) sentence logic, including misplaced modifiers; (6) elementary matters of style, principally sentence combining. Each minigrammar begins with a diagnostic section, which, along with all other parts, has a key. When students finish the diagnostic section of the minigrammar on which they are working, they check themselves against the key. If they have had no significant trouble, they need not do the exercises which follow but can go directly to the next minigrammar. If, however, they have had trouble with the diagnostic section, they must work through the exercises, after which there is a "check yourself" section. If the keys show they still are having trouble at this point, they are urged to ask the instructor for extra help.

Using this method, it is my experience that most students do have difficulties with the diagnostic sections and must work through the exercises, but that most understand enough at the end of each minigrammar to go on to the next. Thus the teacher works only with the few that have deep grammatical problems. Furthermore, once students get past the first minigrammar--finding subjects and predicates--they usually have no further significant trouble in understanding the grammatical principles involved.

The minigrammars are keyed to assignments. For instance, the first two

minigrammars can be assigned before the personal experience paper. If on that paper students have subjects and verbs that do not agree or use improper tenses, they do not receive credit for the paper until they have corrected the errors. I usually assign the third minigrammar--the real heart of the set, dealing as it does with sentence fragments and run-on sentences--about the time students write their first opinion paper, based on journal entries they have done. As they move from personal experience to opinion essays, students are less at ease and less involved; consequently they begin to write more awkwardly. If they are going to have trouble recognizing and writing complete sentences, it shows up most clearly at this time, and this is the time to catch and deal firmly with it. This point should be reached by about the middle of the term, to give time to reinforce the learning through several more papers. The final three minigrammars are less of a problem: students who have come this far through the minigrammars have relatively little difficulty with pronoun agreement, misplaced modifiers, or sentence combining. My work is confined to marking errors in matters covered by assigned minigrammars and refusing to give credit until the errors are corrected. I use red for this, but not for any other comments, and spend some office time working with the few students who don't understand the minigrammars. This is the total time I spend during a term working on grammar.

Does it work? Does anything? I can't claim that every student goes from my class writing error-free papers and understanding more thoroughly how sentences work. My experience has been that quite a few become competent; others improve but still slip; a few simply can't make it. My subjective feeling is that as the term goes on, the red marks, though they cover an increasingly wide range of problems, become less frequent and that there are very few by the end.

Subjective feelings don't count for much though. Therefore last fall I conducted a survey of sorts among the students of one freshman composition class. When the students handed in their first papers, a set of free writings, I separated out every other one and thereafter kept a complete file of the papers submitted by the twelve students so "chosen." I made no analysis of these papers, however, until after the term was over and I had assigned grades. Thereafter I analyzed four papers of each student in various ways.

On the first submitted work, free writing, not one of the twelve students submitted an errorless paper. I counted spelling, capitalization and certain punctuation errors, run-on sentences and sentence fragments, and a miscellany I labeled "agreement," mostly verb and pronoun problems. In the first 100 words, one student had one error; no other student had fewer than two, with the high being 24. Projected to the 500-word theme, the error count would run from a respectable five to a whopping 120! In all fairness, though, of the 24 errors in the worst paper, 13 were run-on sentences, leaving "only" 11 of other varieties. This bleak picture must be looked at with the realization, however, that, the first paper being a free writing, students were making no effort to be "correct." It does indicate, however, that few students sufficiently internalize grammar and mechanics to use them naturally as a matter of course, the way you and I do.

The first more formal writing effort--a description of a place the student cared about--produced more encouraging results. The error count ran from 0 to 6, the latter belonging to the student who had also scored most poorly on the free writing. Generally, those who had done best the first time did best on the new paper, and vice versa. Between the two papers, no mention was made about grammatical or mechanical problems, the in-class emphasis being on finding good topics and developing them with concrete,

significant details. The lower scale of errors therefore probably shows that even the poorest students had at their command certain ways of correcting errors upon demand.

In an effort to assess students' level of maturity, I also counted T-units and clauses and computed the average number of words per T-unit, as well as the ratio of clauses to T-units, these being criteria developed by Kellogg M. Hunt in NCTE Research Report No. 3, Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels. A T-unit, also called a minimum terminal unit, is defined by Hunt as being "one main clause plus the subordinate clauses attached to or embedded within it." (p. 19) T-unit length is a better indication of maturity than sentence length because immature writers write long sentences, stringing simple clauses together with "and." The T-unit, in essence, eliminates coordinate sentences while "preserving all the subordination achieved by a student, and all of his coordination between words and phrases and subordinate clauses." (p. 21)

On my students' free writings, the average T-unit was 8.78 words in length, only slightly over the fourth grade level found by Hunt (p. 56), confirming a subjective opinion of mine that the students initially wrote in simple language patterns. On the descriptive paper, however, written only one week later, the average was 14.01, close to the level of high school seniors in Hunt's study (14.4). This again seemed to show students possess skills they can call on if required to do so.

In later free writing--this time in journals where again there was a deliberate downplaying of stress on grammar and mechanics--the average length of T-units increased from 8.78 to 12.23. The final paper of the term, a formal research paper, showed the average T-unit to be 13.64 words, up from the journal writing but down from the formal paper written at the beginning of the term. Presumably then, students began to write naturally in a more

mature way as the semester advanced, but on the final papers, where considerable pressure was exerted to write "correctly," they decreased the length of their thought units, perhaps in an attempt to exert more control.

To summarize, my entering students used language in simple patterns, ranged from reasonably good to very poor in grammar and mechanics, and were capable of exhibiting improvement in all areas if they consciously attempted to do so.

The final papers in my survey, all twelve, contained a total number of errors as follows: 6 spelling, 3 punctuation, 1 capitalization, 2 run-on sentences, 3 sentence fragments (all in the same paper), and 5 agreement problems, an overall total of 20 errors, as compared to 33 on the first formal paper (and 73 on the original free writing). The grades of the twelve students surveyed ranged from A- to C- (3 A's, 6 B's, and 3 C's). In the first 100 words of the research paper, four students had no errors, one had one error, four had two errors, one had three errors, and two had four errors. No student had more than four. Only one of the three A students was in the errorless category. Both of the papers having the four errors were those of C students.

I cannot vouch for my objectivity in looking at the papers from first to last except to say I tried to be particularly observant of problems in the later ones in order to overcome, if possible, subjective bias. The survey certainly was not a scientific one by strict standards, but I think I am safe in saying that students did improve over the term and the the final papers were relatively "clean." Perhaps this is not an earth-shaking claim; ideally, I suppose, we should strive for no errors of the simple types I have been talking about. But I feel the results were adequate, quite commensurate with results obtained by in-class drill, without sacrificing class time needed

for working on those other vital aspects of writing such as focus, unity and concreteness. It seems to me important that we help students with their grammar and mechanics, but there are far more essential matters to deal with during class time.